

5 A Paraphrase of Hume on Deriving Morality from Nature

My aim here is to establish the following two conclusions concerning the possibility of deriving morality from nature:

1. Whether moral sentiments should be thought of as part of nature, or as things outside of nature, depends on how the concept *nature* is interpreted.
- 10 2. It is pointless to try to determine what is virtuous and what is vicious by supposing that what is virtuous is natural, and what is vicious is unnatural.

In order to establish these conclusions, I'll introduce several interpretations of the concept *nature*. Then I'll refer to these interpretations in my arguments for my two conclusions.

15 There seem to be, in ordinary language and conversation, three interpretations of the concept *nature*, or three ways of distinguishing what is natural from what is unnatural.

1. First, it is sometimes said that miracles are the only things outside of nature, and that everything else is natural.
- 20 2. Second, it is sometimes said that anything rare or unusual is unnatural, and that everything else is natural.

¹ Before writing this assignment, I read the entry on Hume in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: Morris, William Edward, "David Hume", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2001 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2001/entries/hume/>>. Also, my roommate, [name], proofread my paper.

3. Third, it is sometimes said that anything artificial, or man-made, is unnatural, and that everything else is natural.

25 These are all sensible, though perhaps not equally common, interpretations of the concept *nature*.

By reflecting on these interpretations of the concept *nature*, we can see that whether moral sentiments should be thought of as part of nature, or as things outside of nature, depends on how the concept *nature* is interpreted. If the concept *nature* is interpreted in terms of what is non-miraculous, then obviously moral sentiments are perfectly natural; no one would say that it is miraculous that we have moral sentiments. 30 Second, if the concept *nature* is understood in terms of what is neither rare nor unusual, then clearly moral sentiments are perfectly natural, since there has never been any nation, or even any person, who did not have moral sentiments. These sentiments seem to be essential features of the human constitution; they are neither rare nor unusual.² Third, if 35 the concept *nature* is understood in terms of what is not artificial, or man-made, then it is unclear whether moral sentiments are part of nature or are outside of nature. An examination of moral sentiments corresponding to particular virtues and vices may reveal that some are artificial while some are not. Thus, whether moral sentiments should be thought of as part of nature, or as things outside of nature, depends on how the concept 40 *nature* is interpreted.

The other claim I want to establish here is that it is pointless to try to determine what is virtuous and what is vicious by supposing that what is virtuous is natural, and what is vicious is unnatural. Again, the three interpretations of the concept *nature* are the ingredients of my argument. First, if the concept *nature* is interpreted in terms of what is

² My classmate, [name], helped me to understand the part of Hume's view I am paraphrasing here.

45 non-miraculous, then we have the proposal that what is non-miraculous is virtuous, while
what is miraculous is vicious. But this is clearly flawed: not everything non-miraculous is
virtuous; on the contrary, plenty of non-miraculous things are vicious. So the first
interpretation of the concept *nature* does not offer a plausible way of understanding what
is virtuous in terms of what is natural. Second, if the concept *nature* is interpreted in
50 terms of what not rare or unusual, then we have the proposal that common things are
virtuous, while uncommon ones are vicious. But surely heroism is virtuous, even though
it is rare; and surely brutality is vicious, however common it might be. So the second
interpretation of the concept *nature* also fails to make what is virtuous correspond to what
is natural. Third, if the concept *nature* is understood in terms of what is not artificial, then
55 we have the proposal that non-man-made things are virtuous, while man-made things are
vicious. But actions are all obviously man-made, and yet they are also obviously not all
vicious. So the third interpretation of the concept *nature*, like the first two, is of no use in
distinguishing what is virtuous from what is vicious.

I have shown, then, two things about the possibility of deriving morality from
60 nature. First, whether moral sentiments should be thought of as part of nature, or as things
outside of nature, depends on how the concept *nature* is interpreted. Second, it is
pointless to try to determine what is virtuous and what is vicious by supposing that what
is virtuous is natural, and what is vicious is unnatural.